

# Uncorking Idaho Wine

By Mattie John Bamman, September 4, 2015



Idaho's first vineyard may have been planted in 1864, but the face of Idaho wine today is young, both in terms of its wineries and its winemakers. The most telling stat is that in 2002, Idaho had 11 wineries. Today, just 13 years later, it has more than 50. Some of these wineries are producing truly elegant, well-priced wines, but what about Idaho wine in general? What grapes will become Idaho's most iconic? And how do Idaho wines differ from wines from Washington, Oregon, and British Columbia?

While its wineries are young, Idaho is an old state—old in that its traditions run deep. Many family histories begin with the Homestead Act, when pioneers could strike west and claim any stretch of unsettled land. The old barns dotting the rolling hills testify to this long agricultural history.

Fighting sometimes harsh winters in a state little known for wine, Idaho winemakers have had to be both creative and tenacious. In Northern Idaho, Clearwater Canyon Cellars represents the pioneering sensibility that defines many Idaho wineries. The winery started out using only Washington grapes, and the operation was small—so small, in fact, that owners Coco and Karl Umiker made their first wines in their garage. To fulfill their dream of producing a true Idaho wine, Clearwater Canyon planted grapes in 2003 in the Lewis-Clark Valley, roughly 70 miles east of Walla Walla, Washington, and 200 miles north of Boise.

"We had a '52 Ford tractor and some ground," says winemaker Coco Umiker, whose smart, salt-of-the-earth personality is directly reflected in her wines. Both Coco and Karl had full-time obligations, whether work or school. "We planted the first vineyard at night in the rain, while my mom held an umbrella and a flashlight," recounts Coco. The result is merlot, carmenere and red-blend wines that balance a masculine complexity with juicy dark fruit. The majority of Idaho's wineries operate in Southern Idaho, in the Snake River Valley, near Boise. Geothermal activity and a high-desert climate define these wines, and the area's soils are markedly cinder-red. "Temperatures can get up to 105°F, and most nights get down to 65°F," says Skyline Vineyard manager Dale Jeffers. This dramatic temperature shift is fantastic for growing nuanced grapes: The hot days ripen the grapes, while the cold nights slow the ripening for more complex flavors.



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As vineyards like Skyline show, a large number of grapes are vying to become Idaho's most iconic, and leaders include malbec, tempranillo, syrah, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, viognier and chardonnay. Idaho viognier makes a particularly strong case. Unlike most viogniers, which typically express ripe fruit flavors, Idaho viogniers are thirst-quenching and delicate, with characteristics of under-ripe tropical fruit, such as young pineapple and pithy lime. Look for clean, Idaho-style viogniers from Koenig Vineyards and Cinder Wines.

Idaho also grows complex syrah, and Sawtooth Winery's 2012 Reserve Syrah—recently invited to France's Vinexpo—is powerful and balanced, with reigned-in fruit giving way to violets and hints of blueberries. Red blends, especially Rhone-style blends, are another important component of Idaho wine, and Fujishin Family Cellars' 2012 Amatino is a well-balanced blend of 100% Idaho syrah, petite sirah and viognier.

In addition to these grape varieties, visitors to Idaho will find many malbecs and tempranillos, as well as lesser-known grapes, such as petite sirah. For instance, Snake River Winery, with a 75-acre estate vineyard, makes a fascinating red wine using the Austrian grape, blauer zweigelt. The 2009 zings with bright red berries, a soft mouthfeel and nice, acidic finish.

Look for Idaho wines at your local fine wine store, or make the journey to the Sunnyslope Wine Trail, Boise's urban wineries and Northern Idaho wine country. The Idaho Wine Commission website is great for planning your own wine trail: [idahowines.org](http://idahowines.org). For more information about travel in Idaho, go to [visitidaho.org](http://visitidaho.org).

